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ABSTRACT

A community based (Conejo Valley, California) vocational program was designed to give handicapped junior and senior high school students a variety of real world experiences in the natural setting. Advantages of the community based approach include immediate transfer of learning, opportunities for generalization, provision of role models by other employees, and realistic work behavior requirements. Students are paid by the corporate employer and receive work experience credit. Student interns are requisitioned by company departments and the school system contacts special education staff and parents. Unique elements of the program include job coaches provided by the company, group structure providing students with a support group, presence of the school district instructor on the job site to provide instruction occurring on the job site, and the wage stipend provided by the employer. Participation by the corporation since 1985 has demonstrated that none of the original concerns (such as the amount of training necessary) were warranted. Among suggestions for implementation of such a program are the building of personal relationships with business and industry, surveying the needs of the local labor market, using job coaches or mentors, and presentation to corporate personnel by school district personnel of a workshop on handicap awareness. (DB)

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COMMUNITY OPTIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL EMPLOYMENT

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COMMUNITY OPTIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL EMPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION

The quality and range of vocational education opportunities at the secondary level varies nationally and even within local districts. Impacted by rapid changes in technology and the increased emphasis on academic graduation requirements for all students, vocational education has suffered from underenrollment and lack of funds for providing real world experience to students. In addition, there is not always equal access to vocational courses for special education students, who may need different approaches that cannot be served by regular industrial arts programming.

Unemployment among young adult handicapped ranges from 30% to 50% of those surveyed, depending upon which study you have read (Minskoff, et al, 1987). In a recent report of learning disabled young adults whose mean age was 23 years, only 36% were employed while 68% were still being supported by their parents. Not all who reported themselves as working were employed full time (Hoffmann, et al, 1987).

Factors associated with successful post-secondary employment include having held part-time and summer jobs held during high school and high school graduation itself (rather than non-culmination or "dropping out")

Current research indicates that a community-based transitional program eases the movement of handicapped students from school to the work place.

Why community-based?

- Transfer of learning is immediate.
- Nothing is taught in isolation.
- There are great opportunities for generalization -- our students usually don't see relationships without their being specifically related for them.
- Other employees serve as role models in the work place.
- The physical environment of the work place cannot be duplicated on the high school campus.
- The social environment of the business world has different rules and codes.
- Being right there gives the opportunity for eliminating unwanted behaviors and changing work habits in the context of business.
- The needs of the employer can't be simulated on the campus -- bells don't ring telling you it's time to end the period; you finish the job.
- Technology changes so rapidly that the traditional secondary vocational education program can't keep up with it.

The purpose of the project is to help students acquire, apply and maintain appropriate work behaviors in a natural supported work environment.

(Zigmond and Thornton, 1985, Hazazi, Gordon and Roe, 1985).

On the other hand, Minskoff, Sautter, Hoffmann and Hawks (1987) tell us that only half of employers surveyed are willing to hire learning disabled individuals and some indicated that they would terminate employees if they (the employers) learned later that employees had learning disabilities.

Just what do employers want? In 1982, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, in its examination of hiring practices of 172 firms, found that positive work habits -- especially punctuality, neatness, politeness and reliability, were the main determinants of job success and what companies looked for in recruitment of new staff (California State Job Training Coordinating Council, 1986).

THE ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

With all of those factors in mind, we have developed a community-based vocational program designed to give students a variety of real world experiences in the natural setting. We have been working as a business/education team since 1985 and given students choices and chances not normally available to them or to their non-handicapped peers.

The project we will describe is a single component of our career/occupational education program for all secondary handicapped students -- which includes assessment, career guidance, and our own special version of cooperative education.

OVERVIEW

The program we are describing is sponsored jointly by the Conejo Valley Unified School District and the corporate participant.

Several models have been implemented -- all of which have filled specific needs of students and employers. Partnerships have been established in office occupations, the hospitality industry and the field of advertising/retail merchandising.

Participants have been junior and senior special education students. Most handicapping conditions have been included. Why? The ability to relate this experience to what happens after graduation.

Students are paid by the corporate employer and receive work experience credit. In most cases, a grant is made to the school district; the district pays the students.

The current project is being held at the Western Home Office of Prudential Insurance Company. Views of the corporate world, rarely seen by young adults, become real to them on a daily basis.

Departments complete job requisitions/descriptions in-house in order to notify the Division of Human Resources of their interest in the student interns. Internal marketing in the school district is done through letters to parents and contact with high school special education staff.

Job coaches provided by the company assign and interpret tasks to the trainees. District personnel provide a workshop on handicap awareness for the job coaches and on-going inservice. The coaches receive continuous training by the school district instructor and the Human Resources Department in techniques of communication and supervision.

Students are interviewed by the Division of Human Resources and placed by district staff according to their strengths and abilities. The school district instructor is present on the corporate site at all times. Classroom instruction on site deals with work adjustment behaviors in the atmosphere in which they occur.

Stressed on the job are the abilities to solve problems, follow directions, work independently and cooperatively, and complete tasks.

Unique elements of the program include:

- the job coach supplied by the corporate participant
- the group structure of the program -- a built-in network and support group for the students
- the presence of the school district instructor with the instruction occurring on the job site
- the departmentalization of the placements -- not all the students

are "grouped" together (giving an opportunity for socialization with employees and a wide range of experiences which can be shared during class meetings)

•support from the corporate employer in the form of the wage stipend

•the exceptional administrative support the project has received at the district level.

The supervised vocational experience gives the student/employee an increased sense of self-worth and confidence and an opportunity to examine some employment options under conditions of relative comfort and safety.

THE CORPORATE PERSPECTIVE

The Prudential has been involved in a community-based experience for special education students since June of 1985 with great success. None of the reservations or concerns that were present when the project began have come to pass.

Interests of the corporate participants have been met as students fill their needs for temporary low cost entry level help, supervisory skill training for employees with supervisory potential and the need to break through stereotypical perceptions about working with disabled or "handicapped"

coworkers.

Initial concerns about the amount of training time to prepare students for their positions, the communication between students and coaches (would the students fit in?), the need for both partners to be flexible and the fear of student failure on the job have never materialized as anticipated. Certainly, there have been some difficulties, but never insurmountable as both sides work toward their common goal.

Continued participation in the project has been based on the fulfilling of these mutual needs, a true partnership. Students provide a valuable service to the companies. Performance standards are not lowered -- students perform according to company expectations in terms of attendance, dress and behavior. The corporate organization is committed because the program continues to meet its needs and is cost-effective. School personnel have learned to "speak the same language" and are flexible. They share the burden and the responsibility.

The corporate partners participate because they want to. This program enhances company image in the community. The presence of the students has a positive effect on employee morale. Coaches feel a sense of accomplishment as they watch students change during the course of a project and share in their successes. After all, company employees are parents, too.

Because there is <u>true</u> partnership between the company and the school district, the corporate partners will continue to provide the means for young adults to complete their educations and move into the real world.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Building of personal relationships with business and industry and the feeling of mutual benefit is of primary importance for any kind of community-based experience program.

When looking at prospective employers for site development, be certain that you've done your homework.

Survey the needs of the local labor market. Know each individual consumer/employer -- what does the company do, e.g., manufacturing, service organization? Is this an industry with a great deal of turnover? Try to anticipate what the needs may be.

Use your network: family, friends, professional organizations, successful experiences. Don't be afraid to name-drop. Phone or appear in person.

Learn the language of the industry you are working with and use it.

Focus should be made on the establishment of a mutually beneficial relationship based on specific needs. There must be commitment on both sides -- personal and organizational.

A critical element in the success of this project is the use of job coaches or mentors for each student. The coach's responsibility is to orient

students to the world of work, give students clear definitions of the job assigned and provide feedback in relation to the student's performance.

School district staff, specifically the vocational placement specialist and the coordinator of vocational education for special education, present a workshop on handicap awareness and some suggested strategies for dealing with handicapped individuals. We emphasize to the coaches that, though the students might appear to be non-handicapped, they certainly need some special interpretation and instruction.

Students can be referred for this project by any staff person, parents, or themselves. Because of our interest in making this contact with the employer outstanding, we try to build in success by being selective. Each candidate is screened and interviewed by the vocational specialist. Priority is given to seniors or those who are seventeen years of age. (Based on our experience, juniors and seniors seem to be most able to make the connection between this experience and the real world.)

Handicaps have ranged from moderate learning disabilities and visual handicaps to severe emotional disturbance and educational etardation.

Students are made aware of the expectations of the district and those of the employer. For example, they are treated as though they are employees of the site with regard to attendance, punctuality and evaluation. Students can be terminated at any point in time that it is mutually agreed upon by the employer and the school district that this is the most appropriate action at this time.

Students can even learn from failure -- we have never terminated anyone from a project without an attempt to resolve the differences at the site.

As mentioned in the slide presentation, all students are paid at least minimum wage for any community-based program, the reason being twofold:

No one works for free in the real world unless they are donating time to some organization.

Commitment -- employers have an investment when they are paying for service

Once the needs of each department at the site are determined, the vocational specialist does a task analysis of each job to determine the specific skills necessary for success in that particular place. These skills are matched with the specific abilities, needs and interests of each student -- along with the student's ability to acquire those particular skills.

Another critical element in the community-based vocational program is the presence of the on-site school district specialist and an instructional aide who work with students and site employees. The aide can be faded and/or brought on board as individual needs require. By doing this, you learn a little more about the needs of the students and the particular needs of the business you are working with. Just being able to be there to resolve any problems which may arise and provide suppport services and strategies to the coaches and supervisors is really invaluable.

Related classroom instruction occurring on-site is provided by the vocational specialist. Most of the corporate partners have supplied conference rooms for that purpose. The advantage in having the instruction take place at on-site is the immediacy of correction or reinforcement of appropriate behaviors. In the class, we deal with things that are immediate to that environment -- not in isolation as they are usually taught. When we talk about getting along with your co-workers, it is obvious to the students who the co-workers are.

Vital information which our students acquire and which are really generalizable to many work situations are:

- Initiating a conversation
- Dress and appearance for the worksite
- Use of the telephone (answering, transferring calls, taking messages).
- Asking for directions.
- Asking for assistance
- Being evaluated by your supervisor
- Accepting constructive criticism without taking it personally
- What to do if you're going to be absent or late
- Potential for career growth: job analysis and dollars
- Environmental analysis -- school vs. work

Nourish the relationships that you create with the local business people. They will be grateful and you can help one another again and again.

Create a small successful project and help it to grow.